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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: U/S DOBRIANSKY REVIEWS EFFORTS TO
COUNTER THREAT WITH WORLD ANIMAL HEALTH ORGANIZATION
(OIE) DIRECTOR GENERAL

REF: A. PARIS 217 B. PARIS 1209

1. Summary and Introduction: International Efforts to Counter Avian Flu were the focus of U/S for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky's February 28 meeting with World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) Director General Bernard Vallat. Stressing White House leadership on this issue, U/S Dobriansky briefed Vallat on the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza. Vallat discussed his organization's efforts to encourage countries to develop good governance measures that will make possible early detection of new cases of avian flu, and rapid reaction (REF A). He also briefed on the OIE's work with the FAO, saying the two organizations have agreed that the OIE will take the lead at the global and regional levels, while the FAO will focus on the national level. USUNESCO Deputy Chief of Mission, G Senior Advisor Ferrao, and USUNESCO Science Officer (note taker) also attended the meeting. Vallat was accompanied by Advisor Alejandro Thiermann. Carefully targeted USG support to the OIE, based on interagency consensus, will advance US interests in combating avian flu in a proactive way, and in laying the groundwork to counter future threats. End Summary and Introduction.

2. U/S Dobriansky opened by stressing White House interest in avian flu. Vallat stressed the unprecedented challenge posed by globalization: pathogens now have greater opportunity to travel and cross with other pathogens. He agreed with U/S Dobriansky that birds have always been prey to viruses; what's new is the rapidity with which the virus evolves in wild birds. At present, Vallat stressed, the ability of the virus to infect humans is low; it poses a risk to animals, not humans. We must take steps to prevent a pandemic, Vallat declared, highlighting the correlation between the number of viruses circulating in animals and the probability of a virus mutating and being transmitted to humans. What we need are new policies worldwide.

OIE Priorities: Good Governance via Systematic Assessment

3. Queried on OIE priorities, Vallat stressed that the OIE mission is to ensure that all member states have appropriate governance mechanisms, including legislation, organization and resources to detect avian flu quickly and to move rapidly to the confinement and killing of infected animals, and then systematic disinfection of the environment within 3 kilometers. If all countries are able to do this, we can eliminate avian flu. However, of 167 OIE member states, 40 do not manage the problem according to OIE recommendations. If even one country is not able to control the spread of the disease, this will constitute a potential reservoir of contagion for the entire planet.

4. At the January pledging conference in Beijing, Vallat reported, the OIE succeeded in convincing participants that appropriate governance measures constitute an international public good. Wealthy countries -- for their own self-protection -- and financial institutions must devote resources to developing infrastructure in poor countries because poorer countries simply can't. This must be a priority if a pandemic is to be forestalled; it makes more sense to invest in appropriate infrastructure than in masks.

15. The OIE, in conjunction with the IICA (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture), has developed a tool to identify gaps in veterinary services. At the request of the World Bank - which has made this assessment a prerequisite for World Bank investment in veterinary services -- the OIE is compiling a list of experts who can help countries apply the tool to assess their needs and identify gaps, Vallat reported. The OIE regional office in Bulgaria is ready to prepare national plans, he noted. Acceptance of the tool constitutes a victory for public health worldwide, but it will be impossible to apply without a presence at the country level worldwide. It will be necessary to assess, for example, whether more labs are needed, or appropriate laws and regulations. Another key element is workforce succession plans. Vallat noted that some advocate "blue helmets" to help countries manage the disease once it spreads to humans. But more important is a national commitment to implementing relevant existing standards.

16. Vallat stressed the importance of private-public partnerships, of involving farmers and supermarkets on issues relating to food safety guarantees, as well as multinational companies. He noted that McDonalds has been particularly enthusiastic.

FAO Works at Country Level, OIE regionally and globally

17. Queried on the division of responsibilities between the World Organization for Animal Health and the FAO, Vallat explained that the role of the latter is to "fight hunger and feed humanity"; its action is focused on developing countries. The OIE's focus is not limited to developing countries; its mission is to set "standards for everyone."

18. The FAO is a useful partner for the OIE at the national level, with human resources to help poor countries implement new programs. The FAO will play an important role in applying the tool to assess existing infrastructure at the country level: the FAO can help identify key private and public players; the assessment will be performed in the presence of FAO officials; and the FAO will work on in-country implementation.

19. The OIE's mandate is to publish norms and manage capacity building, as well as to explain standards and how they should be implemented at the national level. Implementing standards will enhance international market access for developing countries. The OIE also takes the lead in designing policies. But given the OIE's small size and budget, its work is confined to the global and regional levels; the FAO must take the lead at the national level to implement programs designed with OIE support. The OIE budget does not allow it to undertake additional actions linked to the current crisis.

110. The OIE operates five regional offices that participate in an OIE/FAO/ WHO partnership; currently, the FAO contribution is in the area of plant production. The OIE and the FAO collaborated on a funding request at Beijing for the design and coordination of regional policy on avian flu via the five regional offices. 95 percent of the funding will go to the FAO, because most of the money will be spent at the national level.

Potential Areas for US Engagement

111. U/S Dobriansky queried Vallat on potential areas of U.S.-OIE cooperation, as well as on OIE priority needs. Vallat reported that the OIE has taken initial contacts with both USAID and US Department of Agriculture. A potential area of cooperation would be application of the tool to evaluate the infrastructure of individual countries, and the identification of appropriate experts who could help apply the tool in pilot countries.

112. Vallat suggested a targeted approach. The U.S. might want to select one or two regions on which to focus, providing support for regional activities, technical support and funding for meetings. A limited focus will ensure that US assistance efforts have a higher profile.

113. Vallat highlighted the targeted approaches taken by Japan (who donated 8 million dollars to focus on Asia) and France (for coordination of a policy forum at the global level). The EC would like to focus on Africa; he noted that a group to enhance Africa livestock - ALIVE, uniting the OIE, FAO, World Bank with USAID participation - already exists. Vallat said that he had proposed that the EC provide resources to

ALIVE for avian flu efforts.

14. U/S Dobriansky briefed Vallat on the international partnership on avian and pandemic influenza announced by President Bush in September 2005. U/S Dobriansky explained that the partnership serves to give prominence to this critical issue, opening doors for specialized international organizations.

Vaccination: Not the "Golden Rule"

15. Queried by U/S Dobriansky on his views on vaccination as a means of countering avian influenza, Vallat responded that vaccination is a tool to be used when it is not possible to implement the "golden rule," killing exposed fowl, followed by disinfection. The problem with vaccination is that the virus can remain alive in the population, but not display symptoms. When killing birds is not possible, vaccination can be a transitional means to reduce the virus load, before return to a policy of culling. Vallat cited Viet Nam as an example. Over the next one to two years, Viet Nam will conduct a vaccination campaign as it invests in infrastructure, and then turn to eradication of the virus using "classical methods." China will follow a similar course, Vallat said, observing that China's size and decentralization pose problems in managing eradication efforts; that said, transparency in China has improved since a Director General for veterinary services -- independent of the production and export office -- was named to a leading role. Vaccination will be an essential tool in Africa, Vallat said, predicting it would be a while before the continent could return to "classical methods."

16. On the Technical Level, Vallat explained, vaccination is costly, requiring two injections per bird, timed three weeks apart. Birds are not safe for consumption for three weeks after vaccination. OIE standards require that governments assume heavy surveillance of vaccination efforts, and offer compensation to encourage farmers to come forward. Every vaccination program should include an exit strategy, Vallat concluded.
OLIVER